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News Release

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Recent storms impact stream channels on the Klamath National Forest

Yreka, CA – Heavy rainstorms over the Klamath National Forest within the past week triggered a number of debris flows, with some blocking access roads. Water, rocks, mud and trees were swept downslope in the Music Creek, Beaver Creek, Grider and Walker Creek drainages.

"Not only did these storms start fires with lightning, in some areas they also brought up to an inch and a half of rain in as little as 30 minutes," commented Forest Supervisor Patty Grantham. "On steep slopes where 2014 wildfires left extremely burned conditions, this amount of water falling in such a short time frame scoured out hillsides and small drainages and brought a slurry of mud and trees downhill."

Patrolling for storm damage continues, and to-date 38 drainage pipes on Forest roads have been found to be completely or partially blocked and are being cleaned out. No significant road damage has occurred as a result of these debris flows. Over $1.3 million worth of burned area emergency repair (BAER) work was completed following the 2014 fires in order to safeguard water quality, and protect infrastructure, private property and natural resources from this type of heavy rain event. Storms of the past week have tested these repairs, and they continue to work successfully.

Heavy rain events are anticipated after fires and BAER work is implemented to reduce damage risk. The unusually high proportion of severely burned areas from the 2014 Klamath wildfires increases the risk of debris flows and property damage. "Even when we experience just average-size storms and rainfalls, post-fire landslides are common and expected in many Klamath drainages," said Angie Bell, Klamath National Forest geologist. "Add water to steep slopes and erosive soils, especially ones where there is no longer living vegetation due to wildfire, and the likelihood of landslides is high."

Removing vegetation can lead to increases in groundwater levels over time which in turn can lead to deep seated landslides. The 1997 flood triggered a disproportionate number of landslides in areas burned at high severity by the 1987 fires in the Grider, Walker and Elk Creek Watersheds.

As part of the proposed Westside Fire Recovery Project, tree planting activities are proposed for nearly 20,000 acres of the fire-effected landscape. Tree planting will mitigate wildfire effects to landslide processes by reestablishing living root systems on hillsides that will help hold soils in place in future storms.

"The best thing we can do to reduce the risk of landslides and property damage in the future from severely burned areas is to get trees growing on them again as quickly as possible," commented Grantham. "Just due to the sheer size of the 2014 fires, the majority of the area will be left to reforest naturally. That will be a slow process, and we will be at increased risk of landslides for a longer period going that route. Areas left to naturally reforest will take more than 80 years to attain the same root stabilizing qualities that planted areas attain in about 30 years."

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